International Religious Freedom

2006 Preface

International Religious Freedom Report 2006
Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor

Why the Reports are Prepared

This report is submitted to the Congress by the Department of State in compliance with Section 102(b) of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998. The law provides that the secretary of state, with the assistance of the ambassador at large for international religious freedom, shall transmit to Congress "an Annual Report on International Religious Freedom supplementing the most recent Human Rights Reports by providing additional detailed information with respect to matters involving international religious freedom."

How the Reports are Prepared

U.S. embassies prepare the initial drafts of these reports, gathering information from a variety of sources, including government and religious officials, nongovernmental organizations, journalists, human rights monitors, religious groups, and academics. This information-gathering can be hazardous, and U.S. foreign service officers regularly go to great lengths, under trying and sometimes dangerous conditions, to investigate reports of human rights abuse, to monitor elections, and to come to the aid of individuals at risk because of their religious beliefs.

The Office of International Religious Freedom collaborated in collecting and analyzing information for the country reports, drawing on the expertise of other Department of State offices, religious organizations, other non-governmental organizations, foreign government officials, representatives from the United Nations and other international and regional organizations and institutions, and experts from academia and the media. In compiling and editing the country reports, the Office of International Religious Freedom consulted with experts on issues of religious discrimination and persecution, religious leaders from a wide variety of faiths, and experts on legal matters. The office’s guiding principle was to ensure that all relevant information was assessed as objectively, thoroughly, and fairly as possible.

The report will be used by a wide range of U.S. government departments, agencies, and offices to shape policy; conduct diplomacy; inform assistance, training, and other resource allocations; and help determine which countries have engaged in or tolerated "particularly severe violations" of religious freedom, otherwise known as Countries of Particular Concern.

This document, like several other State Department reports, uses the Chicago Manual of Style format. For that reason, it uses a style of capitalization in which, in general, only full proper names are capitalized. In this style, for example, "Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice" is capitalized, but "secretary of state" is not. No disrespect is meant to foreign or domestic leaders through this style of capitalization.

A Word on Usage

When the International Religious Freedom Report states that a country "generally respected" the right of religious freedom over the reporting period, this phrase signifies that the country attempted to protect religious freedom in the fullest sense. "Generally respected" is thus the highest level of respect for religious freedom assigned by this report. The phrase "generally respected" is used because the protection and promotion of religious freedom is a dynamic endeavor; it cannot be stated categorically that any government fully respected this right over the reporting year, even in the best of circumstances.

Acknowledgements

The 2006 report covers the period from July 1, 2005, to June 30, 2006, and reflects a year of dedicated effort by hundreds of foreign service and civil service officers in the Department of State and U.S. missions abroad. We thank the many foreign service officers at our embassies and consulates abroad for monitoring and promoting religious freedom, and for chronicling in detail the status of religious liberty. In addition to their efforts, we acknowledge the diligent labor and tireless commitment to religious freedom of those within the Office of International Religious Freedom whose work made this report possible: Clarissa Adamson, Patricia Aguilo, Philip Barth, Donna Brutkoski, Warren Cofsky, Doug Dearborn, Karen DeBolt, Lisa DeBolt, Sarah Drake, Kenneth Durkin, Maureen Gaffney, Nancy Hewett, Jeremy Howard, Victor Huser, Shellette Jackson, Anthony Jones, Emilie Kao, Patrick Kelly, Stephen Liston, Kathryn Lurie, Mary Maher, Michael Mates, Safia Mohamoud, Joannella Morales, Aaron Pina, and Deborah Schneider. The work of all of these individuals advances the cause of freedom, ensures accuracy in our reporting, and brings hope to repressed people around the world.

Released September 2006 by Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom John V. Hanford III

Released on September 15, 2006

2006 Introduction

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Faith as a personal choice and an essential freedom is a cornerstone of the American character, rooted in the vision of our founding fathers. Freedom of religion has been one of our foremost liberties from the birth of our nation to this day, and the resolve of Americans to champion that freedom – not only at home, but also around the world – has remained steadfast. As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has stated, "There is no more fundamental issue for the United States than freedom of religion and religious conscience. This country was founded on that basis, and it is at the heart of democracy."

Religious liberty is America's "first freedom," enshrined in the First Amendment of our Bill of Rights. In the same way, freedom of religion is a cornerstone of universal human rights, for it encompasses freedom of speech, assembly, and conscience, which together form the foundation for democratic governance and respect for the individual. For this reason the growth of democracy we are witnessing today has gone hand in hand with a growth in religious freedom and other human rights. Freedom House, which annually categorizes each nation as "free," "partly free," or "not free" based on a wide range of criteria, including religious freedom, estimated that 44 countries were "free" in 1972, the first year that it released its country ratings. By last year, that number had risen to 89 countries. The number of "not free" countries, in turn, has fallen from 68 in 1972 to 45 today.

Yet, while democracy and respect for basic freedoms have gained ground throughout the world, many governments still pay no more than lip service to their responsibilities under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international agreements. In too many countries, governments refuse to recognize and protect religious freedom. A number of governments actively work against this foundational right. And in some nations today, violent extremists, exploiting religion in the service of an ideology of intolerance and hate, direct their attacks against those who seek only to worship according to the dictates of their conscience. Even as we stand together with those who rightly demand religious freedom, we stand firmly against those who, whether acting on behalf of governments or on behalf of organizations that manipulate faith for violent purposes, impede human liberty and democracy.

The Annual Report on International Religious Freedom was established as a means to help promote and protect this universal right. The report seeks to shed light in those parts of the world where religious persecution is perpetrated, and by that light to impede its progress. The very process underlying the report, of investigating, documenting, and protesting abuses, can help mitigate the violations. That so many endure beatings, torture, and imprisonment, yet remain committed to their beliefs, sometimes even to the point of death, is a testament to the strength and resilience of their faith. The Annual Report on International Religious Freedom testifies to this strength, speaking for the many millions who continue to suffer on the basis of their religious identity, belief, or practice.

This report is a natural outgrowth of our country's history. That which is precious to us, we urge others to protect and preserve as well. Our own record as a nation on this and other freedoms is not perfect. However, our imperfections cannot serve as an excuse to retreat from the challenge of working to make this universal right a reality for all humankind.

As the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, with responsibility to both the President and the Secretary of State as principal advisor on advancing religious freedom worldwide, it is my mission and that of my office to stand with those who seek and promote religious freedom, and against those who would stifle it. Under my direction, the Office of International Religious Freedom undertakes a wide range of activities aimed at implementing U.S. policy on religious freedom, working closely with colleagues in the Department of State and U.S. embassies overseas in order to bring the full set of diplomatic tools to bear on the issue. Through formal and informal bilateral negotiations with foreign governments, participation in multilateral fora such as the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe,

cooperation with human rights and faith-based NGOs, and meetings with victims of abuse, we develop and carry out strategies to address persecution wherever it is found.

As we present to Congress and the public this eighth edition of the Annual Report on International Religious Freedom, I wish to express my gratitude for the strong and vigilant leadership of President Bush and Secretary of State Rice on this issue, as well as for the bipartisan support which Congress has provided. We all owe a debt of gratitude, as well, to so many who work in non-governmental organizations on behalf of the oppressed.

The good news, as the Freedom House ranking of countries shows, is that together we are making progress. But clearly, enormous challenges remain. "As the United States advances the cause of liberty," President Bush has said, "we remember that freedom is not America's gift to the world, but God's gift to each man and woman in this world. This truth drives our efforts to help people everywhere achieve freedom of religion and establish a better, brighter and more peaceful future for all."

It is to the courageous men, women, and children around the world who suffer because of their faith that we dedicate this annual report. May it provide some measure of encouragement to their aspirations and some hope that their story is not untold, nor their plight forgotten in the press of world affairs.

John V. Hanford III, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom

Released on September 15, 2006

2006 Executive Summary

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The Annual Report

The purpose of this report is to document the actions of governments—those that repress religious expression, persecute innocent believers, or tolerate violence against religious minorities, as well as those that respect, protect, and promote religious freedom. We strive to report equally on abuses against adherents of all religious traditions and beliefs. The governments we report on range from those that provided a high level of protection for religious freedom in the broadest sense (those that "generally respected" religious freedom) to totalitarian regimes that sought to control religious thought and expression and regarded some or all religious groups as threats.

The promotion of religious freedom is a core objective of U.S. foreign policy and is part of the U.S. Department of State's mission. The commitment of the United States to religious freedom and to international human rights standards is also articulated in such documents as Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which clearly states that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. As an expression of our deep national commitment to these freedoms, the department monitors religious persecution and discrimination worldwide, recommends and implements policies directed toward regions and countries, and develops programs to promote religious freedom. Through transformational diplomacy, the United States seeks to promote freedom of religion and conscience throughout the world as a fundamental human right and as a source of stability for all countries. In so doing, it strives to assist newly formed democracies in implementing freedom of religion and conscience, assist religious and human rights NGOs in promoting religious freedom, and identify and promote changes in the policies and actions of regimes that severely persecute their citizens or others on the basis of religious belief.

The large majority of the world's people have religious beliefs, which they hold dear. It is because religion is viewed by people as having such a central place in their lives that many regard religious freedom as the most important right. At the same time, global trends, regional distinctions, local preferences, and personal histories often lead to significant overlap between religious identity and ethnicity, class, language group, or political affiliation. The right to religious freedom can be abused in many ways both blatant and subtle. The following typology, although far from exhaustive, represents the major types of abuses identified in this report, and may serve as a helpful guide to assessing trends in religious freedom: totalitarian/authoritarian regimes, state hostility toward minority religions, state neglect of societal discrimination, discriminatory legislation that favors majority religions, and denunciation of certain religions as cults.

The first and most stark category of abuses is seen in totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, which seek to control religious thought and expression. Such regimes regard some or all religious groups as enemies of the state because of their religious beliefs or their independence from central authority. Some governments are hostile and repressive towards particular groups, often identifying them as "security threats." It is important to distinguish between groups of religious believers who express legitimate political grievances, and those that misuse religion to advocate violence against other religious groups or the state. This report documents it as an abuse when a government broadly represses religious expression among a peacefully practicing population on the grounds of security concerns. For example, the war on terror must not be used as an excuse to repress peaceful worship. The report also notes those countries and situations in which authorities' over-zealous actions taken against observant believers suspected of extremism have had the principal effect of restricting religious freedom. In some countries, for example, many are afraid to attend mosque frequently lest the government characterize them as religious extremists.

A second category of abuses occurs with state hostility toward minority or non-approved religions. These governments implement policies designed to demand that adherents recant their faith, cause religious group members to flee the country, or intimidate and harass certain religious groups. This report notes, for

example, when state repression of religious groups was linked to ethnic identity because a government dominated by a majority ethnic group suppressed the faith of a minority group. Also detailed in this report are instances where governments used an individual's religious devotion as a proxy for determining his or her political ideology, which resulted in the intimidation and harassment of certain religious groups.

Yet a third kind of abuse stems from a state's failure to address either societal discrimination or societal abuses against religious groups. In these countries, legislation may discourage religious discrimination and persecution, but officials fail to prevent conflicts, harassment, or other harmful acts against minority religious groups. Protecting religious freedom is not just a matter of having good laws in writing. It requires active work by a government at all levels to prevent abuses by governmental or private actors, to bring abusers to justice, and to provide redress to victims, when appropriate. Governments have the responsibility to ensure that their agents do not commit abuses of religious freedom, and to protect religious freedom by rule of law in a way that ensures that private actors obey. In addition, governments must foster an environment of respect and tolerance for all people. This report documents cases in which a government has failed to prevent violations of religious freedom, or has not responded with consistency and vigor to violations of religious freedom by private actors, nongovernmental entities, or local law enforcement officials.

In a fourth category are abuses that occur when governments have enacted discriminatory legislation or policies that favor majority religions and disadvantage minority religions. This often results from historical dominance by the majority religion and a bias against new or minority religions. In a number of these countries, governments have acted on a widely held ideology that links national identity with a particular religion by enacting legislation that favors the majority religion and discriminates against minority religions. Though the majority of the population in such a country may worship without harassment, such a situation cannot be characterized as true freedom to choose one's faith and worship freely. Furthermore, government backing of a religion can result in restrictions even on worshippers in the majority when the state enforces only one interpretation of that religion.

Finally, the practice of discriminating against certain religions by identifying them as dangerous cults or sects is a common type of abuse, even in countries where religious freedom is otherwise respected. For example, this report discusses denunciations against Shi'ite Muslims in Sunni-majority countries, and vice versa, especially where governments have taken it upon themselves to regulate religious belief and practice according to one of these faith traditions.

Between July 1, 2005, and June 30, 2006, the period covered by this report, wide-ranging events had implications for religious freedom. One trend was a significant increase in international media attention to religious freedom issues and controversies. Such events included an international backlash in February 2006 against the republication of a series of twelve cartoons depicting satirical images of Mohammed, originally published in September 2005 by the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten. In choosing to publish them, the European media cited freedom of expression. However, many observers, especially in Europe's minority Muslim communities, interpreted this as a direct attack on or demonstration of intolerance toward the Islamic faith.

The remainder of this Executive Summary consists of two parts. Part I summarizes, on a country-by-country basis, actions the U.S. Government has taken to advance international religious freedom in the nations designated "Countries of Particular Concern" for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. Part II provides a summary of conditions in those countries where religious freedom is of significant interest, including in Countries of Particular Concern. For each country, this section notes the legal situation and relevant policies, and gives examples of particular government abuses or positive steps governments have taken to promote or protect religious freedom. In most cases, these countries exhibit one or more of the abuses outlined above.

Saudi Arabia

The Secretary of State first designated Saudi Arabia as a CPC in 2004. Senior U.S. officials and embassy officers met with senior Saudi Government and religious leaders regarding religious freedom, and the U.S. ambassador also raised specific cases of violations with senior officials. U.S. Government officials also met with the Saudi Government to raise their concerns over the dissemination of intolerant literature and an extremist ideology, and discussed the need for the Saudi Government to honor consistently its public commitment to permit private religious worship by non-Muslims, eliminate discrimination against minorities, promote tolerance toward non-Muslims, and respect the rights of Muslims who do not follow the

conservative Hanbali tradition of Sunni Islam. These discussions made it possible to identify and confirm a number of key policies that the government is pursuing and will continue to pursue for the purposes of promoting greater freedom for religious practice and increased tolerance for religious groups. These include policies designed to halt the dissemination of intolerant literature and extremist ideology, both within Saudi Arabia and around the world, to protect the right to private worship, and to curb harassment of religious practice. For example, the Saudi Government is conducting a comprehensive revision of textbooks and educational curricula to weed out disparaging remarks toward religious groups, a process that will take one to two more years. The Saudi Government is also retraining teachers and the religious police to ensure that the rights of Muslims and non-Muslims are protected and to promote tolerance and combat extremism. The Saudi Government has also created a Human Rights Commission to address the full range of human rights complaints. In view of these developments, the Secretary issued a waiver of sanctions "to further the purposes of the Act."

Saudi Arabia

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The country is a monarchy with a legal system based on its interpretation of Islamic law (Shari'a). Islam is the official religion, and the law requires that all citizens be Muslims. The Government does not provide legal recognition or protection for freedom of religion, and it is severely restricted in practice. The public practice of non-Muslim religions is prohibited. As a matter of policy, the Government confirmed that it guarantees and protects the right to private worship for all, including non-Muslims who gather in homes for religious practice; however, this right was not always respected in practice and is not defined in law.

There generally was no change in the status of religious freedom during the reporting period. However, the Government identified and confirmed its policies with regard to religious practice and tolerance in a number of key areas. The Government continued a campaign against religious extremism, and top officials, including the king, continued to call for the promotion of tolerance. There were reports that some imams (clerics) in their Friday sermons called for all citizens to show respect for other religious faiths. However, there continued to be instances where imams made intolerant statements toward Jews and other religious groups.

During the reporting period, the Government put into place policies to limit harassment of religious practice and curb violations by the mutawwa'in (religious police, officially known as the Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice). Reports of harassment of non-Muslims and non Sunni-Muslims by mutawwa'in continued, but there were fewer reports than in the past. The Government enforced a strictly conservative interpretation of Sunni Islam. Muslims who do not adhere to the officially sanctioned interpretation of Islam can face significant societal discrimination and serious repercussions at the hands of mutawwa'in. Members of the Shi'a minority continued to face political, economic, legal, social, and religious discrimination, including discrimination in employment, little representation in official institutions, and restrictions on the practice of their faith and on the building of mosques and community centers.

The Government confirmed its policy to protect the right to private worship and the right to possess and use personal religious materials. However, it did not provide for this right in law. Despite this allowance, there were reports of mutawwa'in raids on private residences and detentions of non-Muslims for alleged religious violations, such as possession of non-Muslim literature or holding non-Muslim worship services; however, there were fewer reports than during the previous reporting period. Many non-Muslims continued to worship in fear of harassment and in such a manner as to avoid discovery by police or mutawwa'in. Although the Government did not provide statistics on the numbers of individuals arrested for religious violations, anecdotal evidence suggested that there was a decrease in both long-term and short-term detentions, and in arrests and deportations of non-Muslims. However, there were also reports that mutawwa'in, using both Muslim and non-Muslim informants, targeted non-Muslim religious leaders and organizers, and non-Muslim religious groups for harassment, arrest, and deportation in an effort to deter groups from conducting private, non-Muslim religious services.

During the reporting period, the Government made clear in the context of various discussions its policy to improve the climate of tolerance toward other religious groups and within Islam. In December 2005, the King Abdul Aziz Center for National Dialogue convened the fifth national dialogue forum, entitled, "We and the Other: A National Vision for Dealing with World Cultures." The final national vision paper submitted to the King Abdullah emphasized adherence to Islamic values and customs, and stressed respect for others' beliefs and openness to other cultures. In December 2005, King Abdullah hosted a ministerial summit of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which produced the communique "A Ten Year Plan of Action for the Muslim World." The communique included provisions calling for religious tolerance, and King Abdullah inaugurated the conference with a call for moderation, tolerance, rejection of extremist violence, and reform of educational programs (including textbooks and curricula).

The Government clarified that its policy is to halt the dissemination of intolerance and combat extremism both within the country and abroad, including through the educational system and in sermons. The Government confirmed that it continues to review educational materials to remove and revise disparaging references to other religious traditions and fire or retrain imams whose preaching promotes extremist

religious thought. Some journalists at a few, mostly English language papers continued to publicly criticize abuses by the religious police. However, religious discrimination and sectarian tension in society continued during the reporting period, including denunciations from government-sanctioned pulpits of non-Muslim religions and the Shi'a branch of Islam.

The majority of citizens support a state based on Islamic law, although there were varying views regarding how this should be interpreted and implemented.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Senior administration officials continued to raise religious freedom concerns with the Government, including on specific cases. During the reporting period, senior U.S. officials discussed with the Government their policies concerning religious practice and tolerance. This made it possible to identify and confirm a number of key policies that the Government has made clear that it is pursuing and will continue to pursue for the purposes of promoting greater freedom for religious practice and increased tolerance for religious groups.

In 2004, then Secretary of State Colin Powell designated Saudi Arabia as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act for particularly severe violations of religious freedom. In September 2005 Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice re-designated Saudi Arabia as a CPC, and the Government was issued a waiver of sanctions "to further the purposes of the Act."

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 1,225,000 square miles, and its population was approximately 26.7 million, including an estimated foreign population of more than 7 million. The foreign population reportedly included approximately 1.4 million Indians, one million Bangladeshis, nearly 900,000 Pakistanis, 800,000 Filipinos, 750,000 Egyptians, 250,000 Palestinians, 150,000 Lebanese, 130,000 Sri Lankans, 40,000 Eritreans, and 25,000 Americans. Comprehensive statistics for the religious denominations of foreigners were not available; however, they included Muslims from the various branches and schools of Islam, Christians, Hindus and Buddhists. Approximately 90 percent of the Filipino community was Christian. There possibly were as many as one million Catholics in the country.

The majority of citizens were Sunni Muslims who predominantly adhere to the very strict Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence, the strictest of Sunni Islam's four legal schools. In addition most Sunnis in the Kingdom subscribed to the teachings of Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab, an eighteenth Century Muslim scholar belonging to the Hanbali school. For this reason, these individuals were often referred to by others as "Wahhabis" or Tawhidis. Most citizens, however, did not describe themselves in these terms, preferring instead to say simply that they were "Muslims." Some conservative Muslims who attempt to follow the practice and example of the first generation of Muslims, known as the "sacred ancestors" or Salaf in Arabic, were often referred to as Salafis. It is important to note that the terms "Wahhabi" and Salafi have quite different meanings.

In January and February 2006, the country hosted more than two million Muslim pilgrims from around the world, and from all branches of Islam, for the annual Hajj.

The Shi'a Muslim minority (approximately two million persons) lived mostly in the Eastern Province, although a significant number also resided in Medina in the Western Province.

An estimated 700,000 Sulaimani Ismailis, a subgroup of Shi'a Islam, also lived in the country, primarily in Najran.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

There is no legal recognition or protection of religious freedom, and it is severely restricted in practice. Although millions of Muslims and non-Muslims did practice their faith on a daily basis, both Muslims whose beliefs do not conform to the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence and non-Muslims must practice their

religion in private and are vulnerable to discrimination, harassment, and sometimes detention. Islam is the official religion, and all citizens must be Muslims. Religious freedom is not recognized or protected under the Government's interpretations of Islamic laws, and basic religious freedoms are denied to all but those who adhere to the state-sanctioned version of Sunni Islam. Citizens are denied the freedom to choose or change their religion. The Government limits the practice of all but the officially sanctioned version of Islam and prohibits the public practice of other religions.

As custodian of Islam's two holiest sites in Mecca and Medina, the Government considers its legitimacy to rest largely on its interpretation and enforcement of Shari'a. The Basic Law provides that the Qur'an and the Sunna (tradition and sayings of Muhammad) constitute the country's constitution. The Government generally follows the rigorously conservative interpretation of the Wahhabi branch of the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence and discriminates against other branches of Islam. However, in a sign of liberalization, the Government also instructed judges to base their rulings on all four schools of Islamic jurisprudence, not just the Hanbali school and its Wahhabi branch. Neither the Government nor society in general accepts the concept of separation of religion and state.

The Basic Law establishes the system of government, rights of residents and citizens, and powers and duties of the Government. The judiciary bases its judgments largely on Shari'a, the traditional system of laws derived from the Qur'an and the Sunna. The Government claims that it permits Shi'a Muslims to use their own version of Shari'a to adjudicate cases limited to family law, inheritance, and endowment management. However, there were only two such Shi'a judges serving the entire Shi'a population. The Shari'a courts could and did overrule their judgments, and other government departments could choose not to implement their judgments.

During the reporting period, the Government announced September 23 as the Kingdom's National Day, the first secular holiday. The Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha religious feasts are the only other recognized national holidays. The Government again permitted public observance of the Shi'a holiday of Ashura in the eastern city of Qatif but did not permit it in other areas where Shi'a citizens resided, such as Al-Ahsa and Dammam.

Significant numbers of Sufis in the Western Province engaged in technically illegal practices such as celebrating the Mawlid, or Prophet's Birthday, without government interference.

During the reporting period, the Government made clear its policy that it permits private worship for all, including non-Muslims who gather in homes for religious practice, and confirmed that it would address violations of this right by government officials. However, the mutawwa'in sometimes did not respect this right in practice. Individuals whose right to private worship had been violated could address their grievances through the Ministry of the Interior, the Human Rights Commission, and when appropriate, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. During the reporting period, there was no information on the number of claims filed or the Government's response to claims. Additionally, while customs officials and the mutawwa'in do not have the authority to confiscate personal private religious materials, in practice materials were confiscated from both Muslims and non-Muslims. It is the policy of the Government that when processing guest workers, its missions abroad are to inform them of their right to worship privately and possess personal religious materials, and where to file grievances should these rights be violated.

Islamic law considers Hindus to be polytheists; identification with polytheism is used to justify discrimination against Hindus, inter alia, in calculating accidental death or injury compensation. Christians and Jews, who are classified as "People of the Book," are also discriminated against, but to a lesser extent than Hindus. For example, according to the country's "Hanbali" interpretation of Shari'a, once fault is determined by a court, a Muslim male receives 100 percent of the amount of compensation determined, a male Jew or Christian receives 50 percent, and all others (including Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs) receive 1/16 of the amount a male Muslim may receive. Women's testimony is worth only half that of men, and a non-Muslim woman's testimony is worth less than that of a Muslim woman.

During the reporting period, the Ministry of Education continued to revise textbooks and educational curricula in an effort to remove intolerant references. The Government also established a High Commission for Education (HCE) to oversee the ongoing revision and updating of the educational system. The HCE reports to the king and is chaired by the crown prince. It includes the ministers of justice, islamic affairs, education, higher education, and labor, two members of the Shura Council, the secretary general of the Islamic League, and a representative of the Supreme Council of the Ulema. The HCE's mandate includes

oversight of the effort to improve textbooks, educational curricula, and teacher training, including the removal of intolerant text and the promotion of human rights.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Tolerated Islamic practice generally is limited to a branch of the Hanbali school of the Sunni branch of Islam founded by Muhammad bin Abd Al-Wahhab, an eighteenth century Sunni religious leader, which is often referred to as "Wahhabism." Outside the country, most citizens do not use this term to describe themselves. Practices contrary to this interpretation, such as celebration of Muhammad's birthday and visits to the tombs of renowned Muslims, are forbidden. The Government prohibits the propagation of Islamic teachings that do not conform to the officially accepted interpretation of Islam. However, in practice, during the reporting period Muslims adhering to the non-Hanbali school were less restricted than in the past in expressing their religious beliefs.

During the reporting period, there was an increasing degree of public discussion of conservative religious traditions. Some writers criticized abuses committed by mutawwa'in. However, discussion of religious issues remained limited, and the Government placed temporary or permanent bans on some editors and writers of major local daily newspapers for publication of articles and cartoons critical of the religious establishment. In February 2006 the Government temporarily shut down a daily tabloid for reproducing one of the controversial cartoons of Muhammad that first appeared in a Danish daily newspaper. The Government suspended the paper for two weeks for violating sacred religious strictures.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs pays stipends to imams and others who work in Sunni mosques. A separate government committee within the Ministry of Islamic Affairs defines the qualifications of Sunni imams. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs also supervises and finances the construction and maintenance of most Sunni mosques, although approximately 30 percent of Sunni mosques are built and endowed by private persons, either as acts of charity or at private residences. The Commission to Promote Virtue and Prevent Vice is a governmental entity that reports to the Royal Diwan. Its chairman has ministerial rank.

The Government did not finance construction or maintenance of Shi'a mosques. Shi'a who wished to build a new mosque must obtain the permission of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, the municipality, and the governorate (which is functionally part of the Ministry of Interior); the latter office's approval was not necessary for Sunni mosques. While the Government had approved construction of new Shi'a mosques in Qatif and some areas of Al-Ahsa, sometimes after lengthy delays, it did not approve construction of Shi'a mosques in Dammam, home to a significant number of Shi'a.

The Government refused to approve construction or registration of hussainiyas, which serve as Shi'a community centers. Shi'a were forced to build areas in private homes that serve as hussainiyas, which did not enjoy legal recognition. These hussainiyas sometimes did not meet safety codes, and the lack of legal recognition made their long-term financing and continuity more difficult than it would otherwise be. The Government also did not approve construction of a Shi'a graveyard in Dammam.

The Government did not register the Hawza, or Shi'a religious seminary, in Al-Ahsa; it was instead registered as a private house. The government did not support the Hawza, sanction issuance of certificates to its graduates, or provide employment for its graduates, all of which it did for Sunni religious training institutions. There were no Shi'a members of the country's highest religious authority, the Council of Senior Islamic Scholars (Ulema). Religious training for all other religions is strictly prohibited.

Since the 2003 terrorist attacks in Riyadh, the Government has taken public measures to counter religious extremism. The Government continued its national dialogue initiative to promote dialogue and discussion among society and to combat extremism and terrorism. In February 2005 the Government hosted the first ever Counter-Terrorism International Conference for participants representing sixty-one countries and international organizations. The Government also continued sponsorship of antiterrorism and antiextremism public relations campaigns. The government-run television network continued broadcasting programs to combat extremist and terrorist ideology, and senior government and religious leaders, including the grand mufti, spoke out against extremism.

The Ministry of Islamic Affairs continued using the Internet to promote moderation and counter extremist's ideology. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs also monitored the majority of mosque sermons to ensure the ideas

espoused are consistent with the government-sanctioned interpretation of Islam. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs claimed to monitor sermons as part of its ongoing efforts to fight extremism. The ministry also confirmed that its policy is to retrain imams to promote tolerance and combat extremist teachings. It also claims that it is reassigning or relieving imams who would not conform to retraining. During the reporting period, there were some instances where imams were relieved of their duties by the ministry. The Government stated that it barred foreign imams from leading worship during the most heavily attended prayer times, but there were instances when foreign imams delivered Friday sermons in the Eastern Province. Writers and other individuals who publicly criticized the official interpretation of Islam, including those who favored a more moderate interpretation than the Government's, risked mutawwa'in sanctions. Several journalists who wrote critically about the religious leadership or who questioned theological dogma were banned from writing or traveling abroad.

In April 2006, the Government arrested and detained a journalist for Riyadh's Al Shams newspaper. According to news reports, he was charged with "doubting the Islamic creed" and for "harboring destructive thoughts." The journalist had received death threats for his writings, according to news media. He was released after eleven days.

Conversion by a Muslim to another religion is widely considered to be apostasy, a crime punishable by death if the accused did not recant. There were no executions for apostasy during the reporting period, and there have been no reports of such executions for several years.

In March 2004, a schoolteacher who was reportedly teaching students about tolerance was convicted of blasphemy and was sentenced to 3 years imprisonment and 300 lashes.

In November 2005 a religious court convicted a high school teacher of blasphemy, sentencing him to more than 3 years and 750 lashes. The teacher reportedly was teaching his students about tolerance and challenging extremism. Both teachers were pardoned by King Abdullah in December 2005 after appealing their cases. Both trials received substantial international press coverage.

The Government prohibited public non-Muslim religious activities. Non-Muslim worshippers risked arrest, imprisonment, lashing, deportation, and sometimes torture for engaging in religious activity that attracts official attention. In principle the Government permitted non-Muslim foreigners, including non-Sunni Muslims, to worship privately in their homes. In October 2005 King Abdullah publicly stated "people are free to practice their faith in the privacy of their homes." However, the Government did not define "private worship," and this ambiguity, coupled with instances of arbitrary enforcement and detention, led many non-Muslims to worship in fear of harassment and in such a way as to avoid discovery by police or mutawwa'in. During the reporting period, those detained for visible non-Muslim worship were deported, sometimes after being detained for a period of time during the investigation. In some cases in the past, those convicted were also sentenced to receive lashes prior to deportation. Anecdotal evidence suggested there was a decrease in both long-term detentions and deportations of non-Muslims for religious reasons. As a matter of policy, the mutawwa'in do not have the authority to conduct surveillance. However, there was an increase in reports of surveillance of non-Muslims by the mutawwa'in and informants. This perception of surveillance and targeting of leaders and organizers of non-Muslim religious groups by mutawwa'in effectively deterred many non-Muslims from gathering to hold private worship services in their homes. There was continued harassment by mutawwa'in, which either led to warnings, punishments, or short-term detentions of non-Muslims. As a matter of policy, the mutawwa'in are not authorized to implement punishments or detain individuals. Some former detainees reported occasional government harassment and surveillance following their release.

The Government officially did not permit non-Muslim clergy to enter the country to conduct religious services, although some did so under other auspices, and the Government generally allowed their performance of discreet religious functions. Such restrictions made it difficult for most non-Muslims to maintain contact with clergy but did not prevent non-Muslims from gathering for private worship services. Catholics and Orthodox Christians, who require a priest on a regular basis to receive the sacraments required by their faith, were particularly affected.

Proselytizing by non-Muslims, including the distribution of non-Muslim religious materials such as Bibles, was illegal. The promotion of nonofficial interpretations of Islam was less restricted than it was in previous years. Muslims or non-Muslims wearing religious symbols in public that were considered idolatrous within the Hanbali school of Islam risk confrontation with mutawwa'in.

Some non-Muslim foreigners converted to Islam during their stay in the country. The Ministry of Islamic Affairs sponsored approximately 50 "Call and Guidance" centers employing approximately 500 persons to convert foreigners to Islam. The ministry also employed approximately fifty women to work in mosques and advocate for conversion to Islam. The state-owned media reported in May 2006 that in the last 10 years as many as 4,200 expatriates of various nationalities converted to Islam as a result of the activities of the Islamic Education Foundation. The report stated that approximately 40 percent of those who converted were women. The press often carried favorable articles about such conversions, including testimonials.

The Government required noncitizens to carry iqamas, or legal resident identity cards, which contained a religious designation for "Muslim" or "non-Muslim." There were reports that individual mutawwa'in pressured sponsors and employers not to renew iqamas of non-Muslims they had sponsored for employment if it was discovered or suspected that those individuals had either led, sponsored, or participated in private non-Muslim worship services. Additionally, there were reports that mutawwa'in pressured employers and sponsors to reach verbal agreements with non-Muslim employees, who must promise that they will not participate in private or public non-Muslim worship services.

During the reporting period, authorities continued to permit a greater degree of freedom to Shi'a in the Eastern Province city of Qatif, overlooking religious practices and gatherings that were restricted or prevented in the past. However, in other areas with large Shi'a populations, such as al-Ahsa and Dammam, the authorities continued to restrict Shi'a religious practices. In January and February 2006 observances of Ashura took place in Qatif. Large groups of Shi'a gathered to hear Shi'a clerics speak at hussainiyas, to purchase books and other religious paraphernalia, and to participate in marches in commemoration of Imam Hussain's death. The Government imposed restrictions on public observances of Ashura in al-Ahsa, Dammam, and other areas where Shi'a lived, banning public marches, loudspeaker broadcast of clerics' lectures from hussainiyas, and, in some instances, gatherings within hussainiyas. The Government continued to exclude Shi'a perspectives from the state's extensive religious media and broadcast programming but appeared to have enforced more sporadically restrictions banning the importation and sale of Shi'a books and audio and video products.

Members of the Shi'a minority were subject to officially sanctioned political and economic discrimination, in addition to the religious and legal discrimination described above. Although Shi'a comprise 10 to 15 percent of the citizen population and approximately half of citizens in the Eastern Province (EP), Shi'a were underrepresented in senior government positions. There were no Shi'a governors, mayors, or ministry branch directors in the EP, and only three of the fifty-nine government-appointed municipal council members were Shi'a. The Shi'a were well-represented in the elected portion of the municipal councils, however. The municipal council at Qatif was headed by an elected Shi'a. At the national level, there were only 4 Shi'a on the 150-member Majlis al-Shura.

Anecdotal evidence suggested that Shi'a faced considerable employment discrimination in the public and private sectors. While there were some Shi'a who occupied high-level positions in government-owned companies and government agencies, many Shi'a believed that openly identifying themselves as Shi'a would have a negative impact on career advancement. While there was no formal policy concerning the hiring and promotion of Shi'a, anecdotal evidence suggested that in some companies--including companies in the oil and petrochemical industries--well-qualified Shi'a were passed over for less-qualified Sunni compatriots. In the public sector, Shi'a were significantly underrepresented in national security related positions.

The Government discriminated against Shi'a in higher education in the selection process for students, professors, and administrators at public universities. For example, it was estimated that Shi'a comprise 2 percent of professors at a leading university in al-Ahsa, an area that is approximately 50 percent Shi'a. Also in al-Ahsa, it was estimated that there were five Shi'a principals at the several hundred boys' schools and no Shi'a principals at the several hundred girls' schools. Shi'a principals were also underrepresented in Qatif, although it was reported that the Government had begun to appoint Shi'a principals at girls schools. Shi'a teachers were not permitted to teach certain courses in schools, such as history or religion, even in predominantly Shi'a areas. While government officials stated that textbook language with prejudicial, anti-Shi'a statements were removed, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reported that textbooks still contained anti-Shi'a and intolerant references. There were reports of prejudicial questions on exams. There were also reports that some teachers continued to use anti-Shi'a rhetoric, such as calling Shi'a students infidels or polytheists.

Under the provisions of Shari'a law as practiced in the country, judges may discount the testimony of nonpracticing Muslims or of individuals who do not adhere to the official interpretation of Islam. Testimony by Shi'a was often ignored in courts of law or was deemed to have less weight than testimony by Sunnis. despite official government statements that judges do not discriminate based on religion when hearing testimonies. In March 2006 a Sunni judge refused the testimony of Shi'a citizen Ala' Amin Al Sadeh. Al Sadeh filed a complaint with the Ministry of Justice and the National Society for Human Rights. At the end of the reporting period, it was not known whether a resolution was reached.

There were unconfirmed reports that at least fifty-seven Sulaimani Ismailis were still in jail following rioting in Najran in 2000. During the reporting period, there was no additional information on the status of these individuals. There were reports that the Government discriminated against Sulaimani Ismailis by prohibiting them from having their own religious books, allowing Sunni religious leaders to declare them unbelievers, denying them government employment or restricting them to lower-level jobs, relocating them from the southwest to other parts of the country, or encouraging them to emigrate.

Customs officials routinely opened mail and shipments to search for contraband, including Sunni printed material deemed incompatible with the conservative Hanbali tradition of Sunni Islam, Shi'a religious materials, and non-Muslim materials such as Bibles and religious videotapes. Such materials are vulnerable to confiscation and censorship, although rules appeared to be applied arbitrarily. The Government blocked access to some Internet websites with religious material that the Government considered offensive or sensitive.

Sunni Islamic religious education is mandatory in public schools at all levels. Regardless of the Islamic tradition to which their families adhere, all public school children receive religious instruction that conforms to the conservative Hanbali tradition of Sunni Islam. Non-Muslim students in private schools are not required to study Islam. Private religious schools are not permitted for non-Muslims or for Muslims adhering to nonofficial interpretations of traditions of Islam.

During the reporting period, senior government officials announced plans to reform the educational system, including confirming plans to revise and reform textbooks to remove remaining intolerant references that disparage Muslims and non-Muslims or that promote hatred toward other religions or religious groups within one to two years. These plans also include revisions to the educational curricula and the training process for teachers to ensure that tolerance is promoted in the educational system. As a matter of policy, the Government confirmed that it is prohibiting the use of government channels or funds to publish or promote textbooks that contain intolerant references toward other religions and religious groups.

Public debate over reform in the country continued during the reporting period. In December 2005 the King Abdul Aziz Center for National Dialogue convened the fifth national dialogue forum, entitled, "We and the Other: A National Vision for Dealing with World Cultures." More than 700 men and women scholars, intellectuals, and government officials met to discuss proposing a national vision paper for citizens' interaction with other societies and their religions. The national vision paper emphasized adherence to Islamic values and customs and stressed respect for others' beliefs and openness to other cultures. King Abdullah, then the crown prince, began the national dialogue initiative in 2003 in response to calls for real and practical reform in the kingdom. Building on the four previous forums, the December session was the culmination of thirteen preparatory meetings held in the country between April and November 2005 where scholars and civil society members, both men and women, discussed political reform, religious tolerance, and the role of women and youth in the country. Additionally, preparatory meetings for the Sixth National Dialogue Forum, entitled "Education: Reality and Development Methods," were held in May 2006 to address education curricula reform.

During the reporting period, the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR), the first human rights NGO officially licensed by the Government in March 2004, continued to address some human rights violations, although not specifically religious freedom issues. From March 2004 to February 2006, it reportedly processed 5,000 "human rights" cases. Additionally, the Government formed the Human Rights Commission (HRC) in September 2005 to address human rights infractions, including violations of religious freedom. The HRC is also mandated to spread human rights awareness in the country, including by training police and security forces on protecting human rights. The king issued a decree that ministries had three weeks to respond to a complaint filed by the HRC. Most complaints filed with the HRC involved alleged violations by mutawwa'in. At the end of the period covered by this report, the board of the HRC had not been established, and the HRC was not completely operational.

Abuses of Freedom of Religion

The Government continued to commit abuses of religious freedom; however, reports of abuses often were difficult or impossible to corroborate. Fear and the consequent secrecy surrounding any non-Muslim religious activity contributed to reluctance to disclose any information that might harm persons under government investigation. Moreover, information regarding government practices was generally incomplete because judicial proceedings generally were closed to the public, despite provisions in the 2002 Criminal Procedural Law that allowed some court proceedings to be open.

During the reporting period, there was no additional information on the case of a dissident Sunni religious scholar who the Government accused of writing literature that questioned the Islamic establishment's interpretation of the Sunna (the sayings and acts of Muhammad). The Government reportedly had banned him from writing and traveling for several years.

During the reporting period, the government reinstated the travel privileges of a university professor who was banned from teaching and traveling during the last reporting period for criticizing the Government's discriminatory policies against Shi'a. The university professor was allowed to resume teaching in 2005.

In 2003 the press reported a raid in the Al Jouf region, where sixteen Sufis were arrested for possession and distribution of books, videos, and brochures promoting Sufism. During the reporting period, there was no additional information confirming the raid or reporting on the status of these individuals.

In June and November 2005, the Government temporarily shut down a weekly majlis, or gathering, held by a Sufi sheikh who adheres to the Shafi'i school of Islamic jurisprudence. The majlis reconvened shortly after.

There was no additional information on unconfirmed reports that a number of Shi'a remained in detention.

There continued to be instances of detaining and deporting non-Muslims for religious reasons.

In September 2004 seven Filipino Christian leaders were arrested and detained when mutawwa'in raided a religious service. All were released within one month, but mutawwa'in reportedly put pressure on their employers to deport them. Six had been deported by July 2005.

In November 2004, Indian Christian Brian O'Connor was deported after being detained for seven months for religious reasons.

In February 2005, mutawwa'in raided a Filipino Christian worship service in Riyadh; those detained and arrested were released within hours of the raid.

In March 2005 mutawwa'in arrested Indian Christian Samkutty Varghese and confiscated religious materials he was carrying. Varghese was released in July 2005. There were additional reports of arrests in May 2005 of at least eight Indian Protestant leaders following Varghese's arrest, purportedly because he carried information listing other Christians in the kingdom. Six of the eight were released and two remained in the kingdom. Further details on the status of the two who remained were not known.

In April 2005, according to newspaper reports and independent sources, at least twenty Pakistani Christians were arrested during a mutawwa'in raid on a Christian service. Most or all were released the same day.

Also in April 2005, three Ethiopian and two Eritrean Christians were arrested in Riyadh during a raid on a private service. All five were released after a month in detention.

During the reporting period, there were reports of several raids on Filipino Christian services in Riyadh. Mutawwa'in raided services and confiscated religious materials such as Bibles and Christian symbols but typically did not detain non-Muslims. In April 2006 the Government arrested a Catholic priest from India who was presiding over a service in Dammam. He was released on April 7 and left the country the next day.

Also in April 2006 the mutawwa'in reportedly arrested a female Shi'a student in Riyadh, allegedly for proselytizing other students. She was released several days later and allowed to return to her family.

In June 2006 four East African Christians were arrested while leading a private worship ceremony. At the end of the period covered by this report, they were scheduled for deportation.

During the reporting period, there also were reports of surveillance of Christian religious services by security personnel.

"Magic" was widely believed in and sometimes practiced. However, under Shari'a the practice of magic was regarded as the worst form of polytheism and was severely punished. There were an unknown number of detainees held in prison on the charge of "sorcery," including the practice of "black magic" or "witchcraft." During the reporting period, the local press reported several cases of arrests of foreigners and citizens for practicing "sorcery." The raids were reported to be part of a campaign to locate illegal residents.

Mutawwa'in practices and incidents of abuse varied widely in different regions of the country. Reports of incidents were most numerous in the central Nejd region, which includes the capital Riyadh. In certain areas, both mutawwa'in and religious vigilantes acting on their own harassed, assaulted, battered, apprehended, and detained citizens and foreigners. The Government requires mutawwa'in to follow established procedures and to offer instruction in a polite manner. However, mutawwa'in did not always comply with these requirements and the Government did not take legal or police action against mutawwa'in who violated these regulations, even in cases where they used physical violence against detainees.

Mutawwa'in enforcement of strict standards of social behavior included closing commercial establishments during the five daily prayer observances, insisting upon compliance with conservative dress standards, and dispersing gatherings in public places. Mutawwa'in enforcement of strict standards of social behavior was more pronounced during the month of Ramadan. Mutawwa'in reproached foreign women for failure to observe strict dress codes, particularly for failure to wear headscarves, and detained men and women found together who were not married or closely related. In the past, the press reported that mutawwa'in warned shopkeepers not to sell New Year's or Christmas gifts or decorations. The warning also reminded employees not to allow their staff to celebrate either holiday openly. In February 2004, the grand mufti restated a previously issued fatwa that declared Valentine's Day a "pagan Christian holiday" that could not be celebrated publicly. Mutawwa'in banned shopkeepers from selling Valentine's Day gifts and decorations and forbade vendors from selling roses five days prior to and following February 14.

Mutawwa'in had the authority to confront persons for violations of strict standards of proper dress and behavior and to apprehend individuals committing a crime, but must immediately hand suspects over to the police. However, they sometimes detained people for more than twenty-four hours before delivering them to the police. The interior minister announced this policy, but no information was available on whether the Government had taken measures to hold accountable mutawwa'in who broke the rules. Procedures required that a police officer accompany mutawwa'in at the time of arrest. Mutawwa'in generally complied with this requirement, but there were cases during the year in which mutawwa'in violated this requirement. As a matter of policy, mutawwa'in must also have a warrant and be accompanied by a police officer to enter a private residence; however, there were several reported cases where mutawwa'in did not produce a warrant before entering the premises. Mutawwa'in could not conduct investigations or allow unpaid volunteers to accompany official patrols; however, there were cases during the year in which unofficial mutawwa'in harassed individuals and used noncitizen informants to gather information for investigations of other non-Muslims. During the reporting period, the Government issued a decree that all members of the mutawwa'in must wear an official photo identification badge, and all future members of the mutawwa'in must be trained at a special institute. Current members of the mutawwa'in were to undergo retraining. By the end of the reporting period, there were no known instances where mutawwa’in were held accountable for violating government policies.

In May 2006 the Government issued a decree to all thirteen provinces stating that all cases involving alleged harassment by the mutawwa'in would be transferred for investigation to the Board of Investigation and Prosecution, an independent board in each province that answers to each region's governor. In the past, the mutawwa'in had conducted independent, internal investigations of complaints against it. The decree also reiterated that the role of the mutawwa'in ended with the apprehension of individuals accused of crimes and that the mutawwa'in must immediately hand them over to the police.

In general, non-Muslim, non-Western religious communities must exercise extreme caution when practicing their religions. The press reported in March 2005 that mutawwa'in raided a makeshift Hindu shrine in Riyadh, destroying its temple and forcing worshippers to cease their activities. The Government reportedly deported three worshippers.

During the reporting period, there continued to be instances in which mosque preachers, who are paid government stipends, used anti-Jewish, anti-Christian, and anti-Shi'a language in their sermons. Although this language has declined in frequency since the Government began encouraging moderation following the 2003 terror attacks, there continued to be instances in which mosque speakers prayed for the death of Jews and Christians, including from the Grand Mosque in Mecca and the Prophet's Mosque in Medina.

Persecution by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reports that terrorists targeted victims based on their religion. During the reporting period, the security forces conducted a number of raids on suspected al-Qa'ida cells in the Kingdom. Seven members of the security forces were killed during firefights with suspected terrorists. Terrorists also unsuccessfully attacked an oil facility in February 2006. In May 2006, a local man fired shots at a foreign consulate in Jeddah. No personnel were injured during the shooting and the individual was arrested and detained by the security forces. During the previous reporting period, terrorists killed more than thirty foreigners and citizen civilians, including five employees of a foreign consulate in Jeddah in December. More than forty members of security forces were also killed while combating terrorists. The terrorist attacks consisted of kidnappings, targeted shootings, bombings, and beheadings.

Forced Religious Conversion

Under the law, children of male citizens are considered Muslim, regardless of the country or the religious tradition in which they have been raised. While, the Government's application of this law discriminates against non-Muslim, noncitizen mothers, and denies their children the freedom to choose their religion, in practice some children of mixed marriages were raised in other faiths. Women who marry citizens must convert to Islam. There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States during the reporting period.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

During the reporting period, the Government identified and confirmed its policies with regard to a wide range of religious practice and tolerance issues. Senior government officials made efforts to improve the climate of tolerance toward other religious groups and within Islam.

In October 2005, in his first U.S. television interview since becoming king, King Abdullah stated that "people are free to practice their faith in the privacy of their homes." In December 2005 King Abdullah hosted a ministerial summit of the OIC, which produced the communiqué "A Ten Year Plan of Action for the Muslim World." The king inaugurated the conference with a call for moderation, tolerance, rejection of extremist violence, and reform of educational programs (including textbooks and curricula). The communiqué included provisions calling for religious tolerance, improved human rights standards, and state accountability.

There was an improvement in press freedom during the reporting period, and discussions of religious issues were more open. Additionally, increased press freedom permitted journalists to publicly criticize abuses by the mutawwa'in. The press reported on debates in the Majlis al-Shura that focused on whether individuals must be Muslim to attain citizenship and included opinions on both sides of the issue.

The Government also took limited measures to remove what it deemed to be disparaging references to other religious traditions from educational curricula.

Senior leaders, including the king, the crown prince, the foreign minister, the ambassador to the United States, the grand mufti, the imam and khateeb of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, the imam and khateeb of the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, and imams in mosques in various parts of the kingdom continued to call for tolerance and moderation. In May 2004, the deputy minister of Islamic affairs was reported as saying that

the country protects non-Muslims but does not plan to expand freedom of worship. In May 2006, an imam at the Grand Mosque in Mecca called for increased tolerance of other religious faiths.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

As a deeply conservative and devout Muslim society, there is intense pressure within the country to conform to societal norms.

The conservative religious leadership also exerted pressure on the state to adhere strictly to its interpretation of Islam. The Government stated that in 2003 it stepped up efforts to combat religious extremism by firing several hundred prayer leaders and beginning retraining programs for both imams and other mosque employees. In July 2005, the news media reported that the Ministry of Islamic Affairs in Najran fired 17 imams working in mosques in the region and ordered another 132 to attend legal training courses. During the reporting period, there were numerous instances where imams were fired for extremist rhetoric.

There were several media reports that individuals who were openly critical of the religious establishment were often harassed by the mutawwa'in and received death threats from religious extremists.

The majority of citizens support a state based on Islamic law, although there were differing views as to how this should be realized in practice. The official title of the head of state is "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques," and the role of the king and the Government in upholding Islam within the country is regarded as one of its paramount functions.

Relations between Muslim citizens and foreign Muslims were generally good. Each year the country welcomes between two and three million Muslim pilgrims from all over the world and representing all branches of Islam, who visit the country to perform the Hajj and Umra.

Anti-Semitic editorial comments appeared in the print and electronic media. For example, references supporting the idea of "Jewish control over the world," and to the Protocols of the Elders of Zion appeared in the newspaper Ar-Riyadh on March 6, 2006. Cartoons typically used classic anti-Semitic imagery directed against the actions of Israel as a "Zionist" state, particularly in regard to treatment of Palestinians. At times, there were questions raised in the media on whether modern Christians and Jews should be considered "people of the book" and thus due the respect required by the Qur'an. In December 2005, according to an NGO, Sheikh Abdul al-Aziz Fawzan al-Fawzan, a professor of Islamic law at Al-Imam University, urged on Al-Majd television a nonracist, compassionate, "hatred" toward infidels that would guide and reform them.

NGOs have reported examples of hate speech in educational textbooks and, in particular noted that religious textbooks emphasized intolerance and hatred of religious traditions, especially Christianity and Judaism. Officials claimed to have revised textbooks to remove content disparaging religions other than Islam. However, many recently published textbooks still contained language that was intolerant of Judaism, Christianity, and the Shi'a tradition. The Government confirmed that it is revising and updating the textbooks to ensure that tolerance is promoted.

There was societal discrimination against Shi'a, particularly in the school system. Some teachers of Islam told their students that Shi'a practices were un-Islamic and that Shi'a students must follow Sunni traditions to be true Muslims. There were reports that teachers told their students that Shi'a were not Muslims, but rather were kaffirs (unbelievers). Outside the school system, there were reports that eggs were thrown at houses of Shi'a living in predominantly Sunni areas and that some Sunnis would not socialize, or permit their children to be friends with Shi'a.

In certain areas, religious vigilantes unaffiliated with the Government and acting on their own harassed, assaulted, battered, arrested, and detained citizens and foreigners.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. government policy is to press the Government consistently to honor its public

commitment to permit private religious worship by non-Muslims, eliminate discrimination against minorities, and promote tolerance toward non-Muslims.

During the reporting period, the U.S. ambassador met with senior government and religious leaders regarding religious freedom, and raised specific cases of violations with senior officials. Senior U.S. officials discussed with the Government their policies concerning religious practice and tolerance. This made it possible to identify and confirm a number of key policies that the Government is pursuing and will continue to pursue for the purposes of promoting greater freedom for religious practice and increased tolerance for religious groups. Senior U.S. officials called on the Government to enforce its public commitment to allow private religious practice and to respect the rights of Muslims who do not follow the conservative Hanbali tradition of Sunni Islam. U.S. government officials also raised their concerns over the dissemination of intolerant literature and an extremist ideology with the Government.

In addition, embassy officers met with ministry of foreign affairs officials at various other times to discuss matters pertaining to religious freedom. In September 2005, the secretary of state redesignated Saudi Arabia as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). In connection with this designation, Secretary Rice issued a waiver of sanctions "to further the purposes of the Act."

Released on September 15, 2006